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SUBJECT: NIS Democracy Roundtable Breathes Fresh Air into Local Politics

REF: Belgrade 1719

SUMMARY

1. (U) In the first of what Embassy Belgrade hopes to be a series of such events, poloff moderated a roundtable in Nis on November 4 designed to bring together Serbian democratic bloc parties to show our support for them and to help them encourage voter participation as part of our overall GOTV campaign (reftel). The event, organized through the USG-funded Media Center in Nis, featured local chapters of the Democratic Party (DS), the Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS), G-17 Plus, and the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) (Serbia Renewal Movement (SPO) accepted but failed to appear), and was covered by local media. The participants engaged in constructive dialogue on topics related to local civic participation and apathetic democratic voters. Aside from a minor clash between a representative of LDP and his counterpart from DSS on the subject of alleged fraud during the recent Constitutional Referendum, conversation flowed smoothly and representatives discussed their common ideals, motivations, and hopes for the future of Serbia.

2. (U) Representatives of the democratic parties discussed their own motivations for being involved in politics, including fighting against the Milosevic regime in the 1990's, with an LDP official asserting that in Serbia, "politics is a fight for life." Participants of the roundtable agreed that democrats need to increase their direct personal contact with voters, remove stereotypes of politicians by their own actions, and push for greater decentralization and less bureaucratic obstacles to make changes in the their communities. As one LDP representative said, voter confusion remains a big problem, and the parties need to make their platforms clear for citizens in their communities.

3. (SBU) Local media addressed most of their questions to the local party officials, asking pointed questions about their willingness to form coalitions and decentralize authority from Belgrade to individual municipalities. Following the event, the roundtable was covered briefly by national outlets B92, Blic, and Press, which focused on poloff's comments exhorting potential voters to participate in the upcoming elections and signaling USG support for democratic parties in Serbia. Encouragingly, neither Kosovo nor ICTY came up at all, either in the course of the conversation or in the Q and A session that followed.

COMMENT

4. (SBU) One conference organizer remarked after the event that this was the first time in two years the democratic parties had been seen talking to each other in Nis, and their first real interaction with the media in some time. Local attendees encouraged the Embassy to hold follow-on events in Nis and additional similar events throughout the country. Given the success of this roundtable, we are looking at replicating the format in selected regions on a regular basis in the pre-election period as part of our overall GOTV strategy.

